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# **When diplomacy identifies terrorists: Subjects, identity and agency in the War On Terror in Mali**

Pablo de Orellana  
King's College London

## *Abstract*

Why had counterterrorism policy in Mali failed by 2012? This chapter addresses this question from the perspective of how US diplomacy's assessment of issues, subjects and threats on the ground, and how this informed Sahel counterterrorism policy. Analysis of diplomatic communication 2006-10 demonstrates that despite considerable expertise by Bamako-based US diplomats, their considerably nuanced and detailed assessments and recommendations were ultimately ignored or deemed irrelevant.

Failure to utilise available diplomatic information and analysis was due to the dominant policy prioritisation of counterterrorism by military securitisation of territory and borders. The diplomatic communications show that this prioritisation granted the Malian government considerable influence in determining US counterterrorism policy in the country. As a result, the grievances of Mali's northern peoples were exacerbated, and extremism thrived -a tragedy considering US diplomats knew what to do.

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Before deploying counterterrorism initiatives, it is necessary to identify terrorists, their enablers and associates. During the War on Terror, US diplomats in West Africa were repeatedly tasked with an identification and information mission – to identify terrorist political subjects including terrorists, their networks, financing and other enabling factors, as well as subjects susceptible to radicalisation. This chapter explores how they did this through analysis of their diplomatic communication and reporting, and the extent to which their information, analysis and advice was not taken into account in the articulation of specific applications of counterterrorism in Mali. The argument is made that prioritising military securitisation of territory and borders as counterterrorism strategy enabled Malian diplomatic interventions to refocus counterterrorism efforts towards sustaining the Malian state, aggravating dissent in the north of Mali and further alienating Tuareg and Moor constituencies. It is observed that this was due to the application of dominant policy concerns and priorities to how information from diplomats on the ground was assessed. As a result information not directly related to dominant policy concerns was deemed irrelevant and secondary, while communications that were related gained importance, granting greater policymaking agency to the actors and information that bear it.

In January 2012, northern Mali was overrun by a Tuareg and Islamist coalition comprising Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Malian Salafist group Ansar Dine, AQIM-aligned Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO), and Tuareg rebel alliance Mouvement pour la Liberation Nationale d'Anzawad (MLNA). In June 2012, however, the Islamist elements of the coalition expelled their Tuareg allies from all the taken cities in Mali's three northern provinces of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu. In a December 2012 speech at the US Senate, Senate Foreign Relations Africa subcommittee member Senator Chris Coons highlighted the need for a political, as well as military, solution to the crisis ("Floor Speech," 2012). In this and other speeches, Coons specifically pointed to unresolved Tuareg grievances that had, in effect, to be considered separately from the Islamist uprising ("Senate African Affairs Subcommittee hearing on Mali," 2012).

These events are the result of a worrying trend. David Gutelius argued in 2006 that US counterterrorism policies problematically focused on state actors. In the case of Mali, support for the Malian state enabled it *not* to resolve longstanding grievances of Tuareg and Moor minorities in the north (Gutelius, 2006). Gutelius predicted that, beyond causing long-term instability in Mali, US focus on the Malian state would radicalise elements that would and could read counterterrorism efforts as a challenge to their domestic claims (Gutelius, 2007). This prediction seems validated by events in 2012, raising the question as to why social counterterrorism policy, the political cause of counterterrorism so to speak, had become so incomplete and unable to put into practice social counter-radicalisation.

Following recent qualitative research Gow, Olonisakin and Dijkhoorn conclude that the northern Mali conflict was more likely fuelled by a combination of a youth demographic crisis and the socio-economic concerns of a disenfranchised Tuareg ethnic population 'not necessarily, and initially, driven by homegrown fundamentalists' (2013, pp. 244–8). In the application of counterterrorism policies in the Sahel region, it has been observed that a broad, social and long-term approach was essential (Cline, 2007). It is clear, however, that especially when the northern Mali crisis broke out in 2012 engagement

with MNLA was, until Sen. Coon's intervention, subsumed into the assumption of Islamic political subjectivity. That is, Tuareg rebels were swept into the identification of terrorism as represented by AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine. If indeed it 'remains unclear how far radical Islamism is really at the heart of the goals of Ansar Dine' (Dijxhoorn & N'Diaye, 2013, p. 226), it emerges that identification of certain actors such as Tuareg rebels was problematic, for it was contextually scarce, unhistorical, uninformed and ultimately detrimental to counter-radicalisation efforts (James Gow, Olonisakin, & Dijxhoorn, 2013). This problem extends not only to identification of the Tuareg, but more broadly to academic and policy-making understanding of the identification of radical Islamic subjects.

This chapter takes this issue to the field of diplomatic practice, asking the question of how and whether US counterterrorism policy in Mali was informed by diplomats on the ground. Communication from diplomats in-country back to the State department should play a key role in informing policymakers as to political conditions on the ground. Diplomats develop significant expertise and contact networks, providing invaluable contextual information as to subjects, groups and political developments on the ground for policy-making. This analysis interrogates the relevant State Department cables leaked in 2011 by Wikileaks to analyse how diplomatic communication participated – or not – in the identification of issues and subjects of terrorism in Mali. Crucially, it further provides the opportunity to investigate *how* the political cause of counterterrorism in Mali had become focused exclusively on shoring up the Malian state.

#### *Reading identity in diplomatic communication*

Name-calling has a role to play in diplomacy. The method of the analysis here offered draws on the Poststructuralist philosophical position that the constitution of any political identity is not independent of the texts and enunciations that articulate them (see Nietzsche, 1997; Nietzsche, 1914; Connolly, 2002, 1984; Shapiro, 1989, 1988). Language thus does not only describe, but in fact participates in the constitution of representation. This theoretical approach looks to the texts where political identities are articulated to retrieve how a subject is inscribed (ideationally located, that is) in an intersubjective context. By analytically treating text as literary production, discourse analysis can retrieve how subjects are located by a specific communication in spatial, temporal and normative dimensions, revealing the subjectivity of the inscription. Post-structuralists have in this way explored successfully how constructions of identity constitute understanding of conflict, subjects and spaces (see for instance Campbell, 1998; Hansen, 2006).

The form of this method I have developed, *the diplomatic text*, conceptualises the practice of diplomacy through its claim to represent the state at those instances when an agent speaks on behalf of the sovereign international actor. This data selection rationale means considering the communications of agents besides professional diplomats such as leaders, parliamentarians like Sen. Chris Coons, military officers and others who on select instances speak on behalf of an international actor (see Constantinou, 1996). The data used in this analysis is US diplomatic communication between the US embassy in Bamako and the State Department between 2006 and 2010 (leaked via Wikileaks in 2010). Cables and other documents of diplomatic relevance, as per the above selection rationale, total 413. Cables are cited by their original State Department reference, where the first two numbers indicate the year, the letters provenance and the last number its location in cables register.

In diplomacy, communication is drafted, sent, redrafted, summarised and its relevance assessed before being sent on to eventually reach the desks of policymakers. This is a process of *identifying* political subjects. It should be added that dominant policy concerns such as terrorism, and priorities such as counterterrorism, influence the reading, relevance and categorisation of political subjects. To account for this intersubjectivity and plurality of textual sites, this methodology looks to intertextual approaches which consider text in the context of preceding diplomatic messages and, crucially, in parallel to the text of dominant policy concerns – statements prioritising policies that is. This analysis furthermore examines the ‘history of the present’ (Foucault, 1984). It traces the development of the inscription of identity that determined policy to investigate its constitution. Accounting for changes in political identity referents in respect to their own development indicates the potential productivity of identity readings and their location in the global economy of threats and subjects.

Post-structuralist analysis of identity deconstructs the constitution of identity, demonstrating its contingent and constructed nature. The methodology of the diplomatic text additionally retrieves *how*, by *whom* and at which precise instances agency is invested in a particular reading of identity. In many ways, it represents an effort to address the old IR question of *how* policymakers are informed by querying how the text of that advice constitutes political identities (for more detail on the methodology and its application see: de Orellana, 2015). Such is the importance of knowing who We and the Other are.

This chapter firstly analyses the expertise and range of information US diplomats had developed in Mali, locating key issues and recommendations issued by those diplomats. Secondly, the text and spirit of dominant US policy concerns and priorities in Mali are considered. Thirdly, this chapter explores how Malian government engagement with these concerns enabled them to supplant recommendations by US diplomats, granting President Touré’s government significant agency in determining the application of US counterterrorism policy in Mali, particularly in the identification of pertinent subjects and issues.

### *US diplomatic expertise in Mali*

Cables show that US diplomats in Bamako developed an impressive network of contacts and expertise on crucial issues of Malian politics, particularly the conflict with Tuareg and Arabs. Their expertise developed from regional political knowledge, meetings with key figures, travel and even canvassing fish vendors in Bamako on one instance (06BAMAKO1415). This section analyses the terms and extent of diplomatic advice on key subjects, issues and grievances of the conflict in northern Mali. These include: Tuareg and Arab ethnic and tribal groups in northern Mali, the main areas of conflict in Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu provinces, religious groups and political affiliation, criminal enterprise (mainly trafficking, kidnapping and drugs) and relationship to Islamic terrorism and AQIM. Additionally, diplomats considered the nature and chief actors of the northern conflict, particularly since the 2006 rebellion bid by Tuareg groups, which they recognised had implications for counterterrorism efforts in Mali.

The ethnic, tribal, cultural and religious map of Mali built by American diplomats in-country was thorough. It was elaborated from local news, observation, visits to various locations around the country, and interviews of contacts across the Malian political

spectrum, which were regularly assessed in terms of validity and accuracy. Contacts notably included senior leaders of the rebel Tuareg Alliance Démocratique du 23 mai pour le Changement (ADC) (See 07BAMAKO1006, 09BAMAKO211). Reports show that embassy officers were aware of differences among Tuareg groups, tribes and alliances (08BAMAKO0371, 08BAMAKO239), and collected biographical information on power-holders in the three northern provinces, gauging their influence in terms of institutions, caste and tribe and even establishing reliable contact with several (09BAMAKO211, 08BAMAKO239, 07BAMAKO1006). They provided detailed reports on the various ‘Arab’ groups in Mali, identifying three different Arabic and Hassaniya-speaking Arab groups, the Berabiche, Kounta and Telemsi, whom they estimated were more likely candidates for radicalisation than the Tuareg, warning against ‘typecasting Tuaregs as terrorists’ (08BAMAKO371).

Crime, particularly contraband and trafficking, had long been of concern as enablers of AQIM activities. Diplomats investigated the link between Tuareg activities in the north and AQIM in meticulous detail, since these uncontrolled activities were considered key to the establishment of AQIM in the Sahel (Gutelius, 2007). Their conclusion was unequivocal:

[W]hile certain Tuareg are clearly providing logistical services to AQIM, there is little evidence that this support is motivated by anything beyond economic gain. There is no indication, for instance, that Tuareg smugglers or bandits have any religious or ideological links with AQIM. What they share is an interest in trafficking weapons, drugs and anything else passing through the Sahara. Malian Tuaregs generally regard AQIM as a foreign extremist group trespassing on Tuareg land. The Algerians who form the backbone of AQIM do not speak the Tuareg language of Tamachek and share no cultural ties with Malian Tuaregs. (08BAMAKO371)

Diplomats further documented this position through interviews with Tuareg leaders. They garnered from these exchanges that trans-Saharan trade has been a key source of Tuareg monetary income for centuries, not the result of sudden enthusiasm for crime and terrorism. Another key source of income that linked Tuaregs to territorial control was the fee paid to cross (and be guided through) certain areas, a practice the cables recognise as widespread and practiced by all Saharan groups including AQIM (08BAMAKO371). Cables observe many Tuareg wanted to expel AQIM from their desert routes, leading to a conflict that ‘remains one for commercial dominance’ of trade routes, particularly for cigarettes, petrol, arms, clothing and food (07BAMAKO1006). This assessment was an opportunity for distinct contextualised identification, given the evidence that AQIM had its own slate of commercial activities, including trade, trafficking and contraband to their lucrative and visible kidnapping activity (Larémont, 2011). The conflict of enterprises led to skirmishes between Tuareg and AQIM for the entire period covered by the cables, some witnessed by contacts interviewed at the US embassy (06BAMAKO1243, 07BAMAKO587, 07BAMAKO1006, 09BAMAKO257).

State Department officials in Mali examined in detail religious extremism and the structures and people facilitating it. The most extensive assessments concentrated on Saudi-inspired Wahhabism as well as organisations in the longstanding Sufi tradition of the Sahel. Unsurprisingly, Western observers were ‘increasingly concerned over a segment of Malian Muslims frequently described as “Wahabbi”, fearing that those so labeled (*sic*) are likely to advance a radical agenda’ (07BAMAKO1223). Diplomats worked to explore and inform these concerns, meeting prominent religious leaders of

various denominations despite these worries. In a 2007 cable, embassy officials draw on their contacts, meetings and expertise to advance the opinion that ‘Wahabbists’ or ‘al-Sunna’ in Mali are not comparable to similarly named extremists in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. They were less extreme in their views and integrated in Malian society, [n]or are they inherently anti-American or extremist. Apart from the doctrinal differences that separate them from Malian Sufis, the al-Sunna’s opinions on issues like Islamic law, the treatment of women and religious tolerance are extremely close, and in many cases undistinguishable, from their Sufi counterparts’ (07BAMAKO1223). Making this distinction, the cable points to a possible approach where ‘[u]nderstanding why this is so, and what differentiates the al-Sunna from Mali’s Sufi majority, will improve our ability to reach out to Malian Muslims’ (07BAMAKO1223).

Diplomats investigated Sufi traditions, doctrine and groups to assess the threat of extremism. They met with Sheick Sherif Ousmane Haidara, leader of the Ansar Dine movement founded in the 1980s,<sup>1</sup> ‘the only Islamic leader in Mali capable of filling to overflow capacity Bamako’s 24,000 seat football stadium’ (08BAMAKO574). Haidara, far from being an extremist threat, was an ‘important voice for tolerance’, and a key local ally for anti-extremism efforts due to his aversion to extremism, religious violence, cross-sect appeal and willingness to work with international partners. The author of the cable saw an opportunity to ‘explore ways of working with Haidara to help reinforce Malians’ traditional aversion to extremist messages’ (08BAMAKO574). Embassy officials also travelled to Nioro du Sahel, on the border with Mauritania, to meet with Amadou Hady Tall and Moamed Ould Cheikhna, respectively leaders of the Tijani and Hamalli Sufi traditions. They made it clear to embassy officials that they opposed AQIM, its goals and methods and were ‘concerned about the number of individuals encouraging violence in the name of Islam’ (08BAMAKO288). So far, US diplomats had not encountered evidence of large-scale religious extremism on the order of the perceived Al Qaeda threat in Mali.

Finding no direct link between Tuareg militancy and religious affiliation, diplomats turned to exhaustive documentation of Tuareg grievances including human rights abuses, mistrust of the Bamako government in the north, poor governance and lack of infrastructure. Communications documented the political consequences of human rights abuses of Tuareg and Arabs in northern Mali, even identifying serial abusers such as the Malian-sponsored militias led by Colonel-Major Abderahmane Ould Meydou who frequently killed and tortured Tuareg prisoners (09BAMAKO211, 08BAMAKO366, 08BAMAKO239). These abuses, the cables highlight, are of extreme political importance: Tuareg relations with the Bamako government are undermined, fuel grievances, create lasting mistrust and resentment against the government (08BAMAKO239). Similarly, poor representation in government is an issue of contention, particularly the lack of northerners in the Presidency and key institutions (09BAMAKO105, 08BAMAKO239). Lack of investment in public infrastructure such as wells, corruption of the few government officials in the north, and lack of faith in Malian justice and security are long-term problems fuelling Tuareg and Arab grievances (09BAMAKO211, 08BAMAKO239).

US diplomats were concerned about the Tuareg-Malian Algiers accords of June 2006. Supported by the US and mediated by Algeria, the accords provided for improved

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<sup>1</sup> also spelled Ançar Dine. This is not the same Ansar Dine that took over northern Mali with MNLA in 2012 led by Iyad Ag Ghaly. Both mean ‘defenders of the faith’

northern governance, some degree of autonomy and most importantly for mixed Tuareg, Arab and Southern military units to provide security in the three northern provinces. The Malian government proved reticent and cables made it clear that at least ‘the partial success of the Algiers Accords’ was essential to avoid another rebellion (08BAMAKO239). If grievances including compliance with the Algiers Accords are not resolved, cables warn, disparate Tuareg, Arab and Songhai movements will once again join forces against Bamako as had happened in the 1990s (08BAMAKO239). ‘Alarm bells should start to ring the moment violence spreads to include a non-Tuareg group of rebels or bandits’ (08BAMAKO824).

Considering this expertise, diplomats were in a position to advise on the role of the US in the context of achieving antiterrorism goals in Mali. Firstly, it is clear diplomats were sceptical of a military solution to the northern problem. Cables show no confidence, ‘given the Malian military’s most recent performance’ in their capacity to secure ‘Mali’s north-eastern corner’ (08BAMAKO295). Secondly, they made it clear that any solution should not be primarily military, but advised that it was a priority for the 2006 Algiers Accords to come into effect (08BAMAKO239). In a ‘scene-setter’ for a June 2008 Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Todd Moss visit to Mali, Ambassador Terence McCulley advises that the visit ‘will afford an important opportunity for us to engage Malian government officials on need for forward movement on the Algiers Accords’ (08BAMAKO491). The formation of mixed Tuareg-Malian-Arab military units was a particularly thorny unresolved provision of the Algiers accord. Diplomats advised that ‘[p]ressure and resources from other international partners –such as the US, Canada and the EU- may give President Toure the ability to make some face-saving concessions such as a reduction of force in Tinzawaten [in Kidal province] and the creation of mixed military units’ (08BAMAKO375). In addition to compliance with the Accords, they advised that the Malian government be pressured to address human rights abuses and insecurity, particularly public executions of Tuareg and torture of prisoners by Malian militias to reduce mistrust of the Malian government (08BAMAKO419, 08BAMAKO375).

Diplomats had also detected goodwill towards the US by Tuareg leaders. Throughout the period studied, cables note Tuareg efforts to help the rescue of Westerners kidnapped by AQIM (09BAMAKO186), challenge AQIM militarily (09BAMAKO257, 07BAMAKO1006, 07BAMAKO587, 06BAMAKO1243), and multiple offers of counterterrorism assistance (08BAMAKO462). Some of this goodwill stemmed from political and logistical assistance for the 2007 Kidal Forum, which had cemented the new Algiers Accords signed the previous year and showed American ‘commitment to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict in northern Mali’ (07BAMAKO394).

Observations made in cables as to representation of the Tuareg in Malian government communications with the US indicate scepticism and suspicion that Malian focus on the Tuareg as enablers of terror is a ‘Tuareg diversion’ (08BAMAKO462). This suspicion is reinforced by claims by Tuareg contacts that ‘Mali receives “tens of thousands” of dollars in counter-terrorism assistance from the U.S. and other donors but is now using this money to fight Tuaregs instead of terrorists’ which they attributed to ‘using AQIM as an excuse for harassing local Tuareg populations’ (08BAMAKO462, 09BAMAKO211). This link was not credible to US diplomats; AQIM was using northern Mali as a base, but ‘no terrorist attacks occurred in Mali’ in 2008 (08BAMAKO937). In sum, ‘typecasting Tuaregs as terrorists’ was a mistake – other groups were more likely customers for terrorism (08BAMAKO371).



Diplomats' analysis also identified the potentially negative political productivity of 'perceptions' of counterterrorism. 'Should tensions and clashes between the Malian military and Tuareg rebels increase, Tuaregs in opposition to the Malian government are likely to perceive counter-terrorism assistance provided by the U.S. and other international donors to the Malian military as counter to Tuareg interests' (08BAMAKO462). In other words, the Tuareg could come to see counterterrorism as a threat to themselves, their grievances and claims for autonomy. The cables highlight 'the delicate balance the USG [US Government] must strike between supporting Malian sovereignty over their territory and providing economic alternatives to a population which historically controlled the 'Trans-Saharan trade routes' (08BAMAKO462). Throughout the period studied, cables recommend that constant US pressure on Mali to 'hammer out a realistic timeline for Algiers Accords implementation' was essential to avoid a Tuareg crisis as well as northern suspicion of the US and counterterrorism (08BAMAKO339). Additionally, the cables advise that the US could, and should, pressure the Malian government to engage meaningfully with Tuareg grievances, address human rights abuses, lack of economic opportunity, food security, education, and some political autonomy (08BAMAKO366, 08BAMAKO375).

*Policy concerns: the Malian State, counterterrorism, territory, subjects*

US policy during 2003-2012 did not reflect the advice of its diplomats. The overriding priority in Western Sahel policy was counterterrorism, which was to be achieved by denying terrorists space and resources. This policy translated into concrete actions to shore up the Malian state's hold over the north (Joffe, 2012). Most resulting policy decisions gravitated around the view that Malian control of the north would result in the ability to counter the (then small) AQIM presence. US initiatives to address grievances in the north were limited in scope and scale whilst Malian efforts had been minimal since independence. In addition some policies were contradictory, like the IMF and State Department-supported privatisation of the cotton industry, which cables suggested would lead to further unemployment and the degradation of traditional growing and elaboration networks (09BAMAKO340). Policy objectives to address Tuareg and Arab social and human rights as well as economic grievances were, despite the advice of diplomats, secondary to military counterterrorism approaches, particularly military aid and training. This section firstly analyses the articulation of Saharan identities in diplomatic communication, retrieving how they are constructed and the terms of its economy of identity. Secondly US policy priorities in northern Mali are analysed, focusing on control of the northern territories, the "Tuareg first, then AQIM" approach, and control of facilitators.

Controlling the 'porous borders', 'a frontier that totals more than 7,000km', and vast 'ungoverned spaces' of northern Mali became the chief means to counter terrorism in the Sahel (08BAMAKO217, 09BAMAKO4350, 07BAMAKO1361, see also Anderson, 2013). This was established as early as 2002 and had by then already failed to contextually identify AQIM (earlier known as Groupe Salafiste de Predication et du Combat, GSPC) and its role among regional actors (see Joffe, 2012). The cables demonstrate that military control of the north was an overarching priority. The vast majority of the cables from the Bamako embassy - and every single one with "Tuareg" in the title - include considerations of terrorism and security. The problems and subjects of terrorism in the frontier territory of northern Mali are represented in the most superlative terms possible

in geographical expression. Constantly repeated terms are: 'vast', 'sparsely populated and vast northern regions', providing 'a haven for smugglers, bandits and terrorist elements' (08BAMAKO491, 09BAMAKO4350). These terms are the currency of this theme, repeated in every communication and serving as the basis for considerations of spatial issues. They are the terms that both describe and, most importantly, constitute the spatial dimension where northern Mali is located. Control, defence and security of northern Mali are described in vocabulary reminiscent of siege warfare: a 'porous' border of 'more than 7,000km' which the 'Malian government is unable to fully secure [...] due to their size and remote nature' (08BAMAKO491).

The actors that inhabit and move in this space live in an anarchic 'ungoverned' world of 'unrest' where the capacity for violence and fraught emptiness are posited as inextricable (08BAMAKO491). Such descriptions of subjects and spaces could be taken out of a book for 1930s teenagers like Tintin (Hergé, 2011). Historically a haven for 'smugglers', 'bandits', the vast desert could serve as well for terrorists (08BAMAKO491). The language in which operations by Tuareg rebel Ibrahim Bahanga are described reflects the assumption of uncontrolled subjects in uncontrolled spaces. Textualisations like 'Bahanga runs amok', 'ventured into ... region', 'roaming' across deserts, suggest that this space of emptiness gives license license, so that violence and tribal allegiances are the only limitations (08BAMAKO968). As examined above, diplomats made efforts to highlight that the link between these activities and terrorism is questionable and occasional at most. Subjects are situated in Western spatial and temporal discourses in very specific terms. The space they inhabit, the desert, is empty, removed from all civilisations and thus incomprehensible, deeply romanticised and intertwined with historicised visions of Arabian conquest on camelback (see Said, 1990, 2003; Vatin, 1984). Temporally, the context is one of previous camelback caravans replaced by traffickers, bandits and outlaws on 4x4s in a frame that expounds a negative process of modernisation (08BAMAKO435). The resulting normative or ethical location of subjects inhabiting the Sahara is one of lawlessness, crime and survival, making it ever more possible for these dodgy characters to collaborate with AQIM for 'economic gain' (08BAMAKO371).

The policy response was to enhance Mali's capacity for counterterrorism by helping it control its territory and people, since it wasn't able to alone (08BAMAKO491). The strategy denoted by the diplomatic communication is that such control would enable Mali to effectively counter terrorism (see for instance 09BAMAKO85). This territorial control approach to counterterrorism meant that the first priority was to quell the Tuareg rebellion and the resulting security in the north would then allow the Malian military to concentrate on AQIM. This approach is especially marked from the very end of the incipient and small 2006 Tuareg rebellion until the end of the period studied in 2010. The "Tuareg first, then AQIM" approach explains efforts by diplomats to exhaustively document and advise on solutions to Tuareg restiveness: Mali's control of its Tuaregs was effectively established as a precondition to counterterrorism efforts.

This approach was part of a wider drive to develop a Saharan regional approach to counter terrorism. This was based on a partnership of willing Saharan States, firstly the Pan-Sahel Initiative (2002-2004) and then the Trans-Saharan counterterrorism Partnership (TSCT). Their goal, particularly the TSCT, was to control territory, denying terrorist groups safe haven (Anderson, 2013). This partnership was founded on the need for each state to effectively police its own borders and provide sufficient security and social stability to avoid the rise of further extremism (Larémont, 2011, p. 262). The

policy of territory denial required strong and stable state organisations and it was estimated that the greatest challenge was to ensure each of them could fully control their territory (Boudali, 2007). Any subjects identified as an obstacle to this control therefore emerge as the priority threats to the implementation of counterterrorism policy.

Mali had demonstrated willingness to participate to the extent that it was considered 'an important ally in the global war on terror and a key member of the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership' (08BAMAKO491). Just as often, Malian officers added the proviso that the north needed to be under full control before Mali could turn its efforts to AQIM (08BAMAKO558). In sum, 'an end to hostilities with the Malian government may enable northern units commanded by Bamako to turn their sights on other pressing northern security matters including AQIM' (09BAMAKO85). Counterterrorism in Mali was overtaken by territoriality and the Tuareg issue: Bamako is willing to assist in counterterrorism but only when it has resolved issues in the north. As analysed in the first section, diplomats constantly argued in cables that this was achievable by implementation of the Algiers Accords and a concerted Malian effort to address Tuareg human rights and economic grievances. Between 2002 and 2008, US efforts addressed these multifaceted recommendations with programs ranging from the Ambassador's Girls Education Program to assistance for the development of Malian governance, social services and economic development in the north (Larémont, 2011, p. 261).

The last major diplomatic effort to encourage a political solution in the north was a meeting between Malian Foreign Minister Ouane and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Todd Moss, where the latter expresses support and offers assistance for the implementation of the Algiers Accords (08BAMAKO558). Policy application as developed by 2008, however, limited focus on military assistance, training, material and intelligence to secure the north. The cables bear this out: the "Tuareg first, then AQIM" approach is assumed to be the key medium-term strategy in all cables examined; additionally policy increasingly focused from 2008 on territorial control, denial of havens, rather than northern grievances. The question emerges as to how the social aspect of US counterterrorism policy for Mali was progressively diluted 2006-8.

The short analysis of the constitution of Saharan identities in diplomatic communication suggests that subjects identified as an obstacle to Sahel counterterrorism's central tenet of territorial control ('Traffickers', Tuaregs, 'bandits') could potentially emerge as terrorist-enabling subjects, a threat to implementation of counterterrorism policy. It is also clear that, for US diplomats at least, this was not the case with the Tuareg.

The development of US counterterrorism policy in the Sahel poses the pressing question of how, despite diplomats' detailed and nuanced recommendations, the shift in focus from social to military capabilities came about. To thus enquire into this shift in policy implementation additionally invites the question of Mali's agency in the implementation of US counterterrorism policy in the Sahara.

#### *'You can count on us': American policy concerns and Malian policy agency*

The consequences of the shift in focus of Saharan counterterrorism policy were devastating for US diplomatic reporting and for subsequent policymaking. Reporting priorities focus on control of space, subjects, willingness and readiness of partner

Saharan states to participate in the War on Terror as well as factors working against counterterrorism collaboration. This section firstly analyses shifts in State Department reporting priorities and how this elicited changes in focus and content. This analysis greatly benefits from the April 2009 cable 09STATE37566 signed Hillary Clinton 'Reporting and collection needs: West Africa Sahel Region', which over seven pages details information and intelligence collection priorities for US diplomats in West Africa. This analysis delves into State Department responses to its diplomatic officers to assess the usefulness of this reporting and particularly how it was read back in Washington. The analysis then moves onto how the shift in priorities changed the nature of diplomatic reporting, ultimately enabling the Touré government to gain significant agency in directing US efforts in the application of counterterrorism policy in Mali whilst similar efforts by the Tuareg failed.

Reporting priorities in diplomatic communication by 2008-9 feature collections of biographic information on individuals of security relevance since 'the intelligence community relies on State reporting officers for much of the biographical information collected worldwide' (09STATE37566). Biographic information collection included contact, personal, financial, social and even social media details, which were then passed on to security agencies (09STATE37566). This reporting goes hand in hand with the identification of groups to which specific subjects belong, their relative influence within it and aspects of their background and affiliations that might be of security relevance. For instance, the above-cited cable 08BAMAKO371, a report on northern ethnic and tribal groups, details individuals of relevance for each group.

'Response To Terrorism', particularly '[c]apability, willingness and intent of countries to cooperate with U.S. counterterrorism (CT) efforts and policies, and to conduct counterterrorist operations' was another key issue on which diplomats are requested to report in detail (09STATE37566). This was to be referenced against the bibliographic data (determining *who* was helpful in counterterror) to ensure a more complete and intelligence-worthy assessment. Mali is constantly identified as one such helpful actor, passionately willing to collaborate in counterterrorism.

State Department additionally requested details of insurgents, opposition movements, nationalists and any other group that might destabilise a partner government (09STATE37566). Focus on this concern for 'instability' of state control of space, subjects and movement is related to the assessment of a state's capability to engage in counterterrorism and is part of a list of factors diplomats are requested to investigate in the context of issues that might hinder counterterrorism or assist terror – which are placed at the same discursive level (09STATE37566). This list notably includes questions as to how non-state subjects participate in/against the War on Terror including: human traffickers, drug dealers, smugglers, refugee groups, legal and illegal opposition groups and human rights organisations.

When information is requested for such groups in West Africa (Mali appears a priority country in this reporting request, 09STATE37566) two aspects of this list are remarkable. Firstly, all of these factors are placed at the same level as impediments to effective counterterrorist collaboration. They are treated similarly on the basis of the National Intelligence Priorities Framework (NIPF) established on 24 February 2003 which also dictated the means by which intelligence was to be collected, allocating significant human-contact-based intelligence gathering to diplomats. The second remarkable feature is the requirement to assess, for *all* non-state actors, even opposition parties, the extent

to which they are related, financed or linked to ‘foreign governments or insurgent/separatist groups’ as well as ‘collaboration with terrorist or insurgent groups’. This creates a binary: non-state actors against partner states. If the latter are the willing actors in counterterrorism initiatives, the former can become obstacles and threats.

The Director of National Intelligence’s 2003 NIPF, mandated on diplomatic reporting in 2004 in cable 04STATE179667, and updated in 2009 in cable 09STATE37566, colonised diplomatic reporting practices by establishing key requirements and frameworks of assessment and relevance. Crucially for identification of the Tuareg’s role in counterterrorism, it established the assumption in diplomatic reporting that all non-state subjects are potentially linked to terrorist or insurgent activity. The result was predictable. Information, now channelled and assessed along the terms of NIPF, responded to intelligence-gathering, strategic, security and military priorities. Observation of the cables produced after the application of the NIPF show this in a number of ways. At a basic level almost all reporting, even on presidential and parliamentary election results, includes consequences for counterterrorism strategy. Deeper in the cables, particularly the exchange between the State Department and the mission, show that a filtering process occurs, where much of the above-analysed detail and nuance is lost and disappears, particularly from 2008. It became simply irrelevant in the light of the codification and prioritisation of information dictated by the dominant policy concern of counterterror. A 2008 cable with questions from the State Department for US diplomats in Bamako illustrates this filtering process (08STATE90615). The questions it poses are concerned with the ‘Tuareg insurgents in Mali’ challenge to Malian stability although one of the questions still addresses Malian abuses in Kidal from the perspective of its capacity to cause unrest or even ‘a full-scale rebellion’ (08BAMAKO824).

The assessment of the relevance of information and resulting filtering is visible in cable 09STATE99793 authored six months after the aforementioned 2009 update to NIPF priorities in diplomatic reporting. The State Department ‘GREATLY APPRECIATE POST’S CONTINUING REPORTING ON POTENTIAL CHANGES TO THE MALI-AQIM RELATIONSHIP. THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL DIRECTOR FOR COUNTERTERRORISM IN PARTICULAR HAS BEEN VERY INTERESTED IN THESE REPORTS, AS HAVE SENIOR POLICYMAKERS FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY, FBI AND THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE.’ (Capitals in original) The reporting in cables had increasingly become restricted in detail and nuance, its relevance strictly assessed and governed by policy priorities. The cables go on to inform additional policy-making, further entrenching this rise in contextual information scarcity. Most importantly, these set the scene for any non-state actor in northern Mali to be potentially identified as an enabler of terrorism, for policy to increasingly focus on border and territorial control to the detriment of social and political factors.

The gradual narrowing in range, scope and relevance of diplomatic reporting allowed for the initial social and political US policy answer to northern Mali instability to sink. Cables reveal that this situation was extremely productive for Touré’s government, which filled the gap in information and relevance and in so doing secured significant agency in the application of counterterror policy in the Sahel.

The Malian government enthusiastically communicated its willingness and readiness to counter terrorism. The first plank of this support of counterterrorism was state-level commitment to US-led counterterrorism initiatives the Pan-Sahel Initiative (2002-2004)

and then TSCT, to which the Malian government constantly reiterated support. (See 08BAMAKO491 for instance). This support is reiterated at any available opportunity, for instance in meetings with US ambassadors, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and US General Ward, Head of AFRICOM (08BAMAKO558, 07BAMAKO1361, 08BAMAKO219). Mali was also involved in a number of US-funded development initiatives such as the Millennium Challenge Compact, as mentioned by former President G. W. Bush and President Touré's at a meeting in Washington in 2008. ("President Bush Meets with Mali President Amadou Touré," 2008) In 2007 the Malian government even advocated installing the headquarters of AFRICOM in Bamako on the basis of Mali's 'strong bilateral relationship with the United States (07BAMAKO166). It is of interest to note that whilst Malian expressions of counterterrorist willingness were enthusiastic, the cables make it clear that diplomats were extremely sceptical of its application, which they described as inconsistent, poorly planned and minimal, to the point that they made it clear that they had no faith in the ability of the Malian military to achieve any security or counterterrorist objectives (08BAMAKO295).

In this context of willing collaboration, Mali was able to propose the mission of counterterrorism in its own terms, language and most importantly, its own identification of subjects despite the warnings of US diplomats. This is *how* Touré's government proposed its enemies as subjects of counterterrorism. The link is constantly proposed by Malian diplomats between lack of control in the north and AQIM's presence, conditioning Malian efforts against AQIM upon full control of the north (see 08BAMAKO558, 08BAMAKO357, 09BAMAKO85).

Linking territorial control of the north and counterterrorism is crucial because it responds and engages with US preoccupations with free flows of people and material. This bind, I argue, furthermore came to constitute the US approach to counterterrorism in Mali, particularly the military intensification of that approach, to the detriment of the hitherto proposed social and regional focus. This logic was at the heart of shifts in US policy towards collaboration and policy in Mali. It produced another diplomatic good for Mali: it served as a justification for Mali's slowness in applying the Algiers Accords and more generally address Tuareg grievances. This reveals a cleavage in agency: though US diplomats (and even journalists) had identified key grievances in need of resolution, this gradually ceded from 2008 to the priority of strategic control of the north – firmly encouraged by the Malian government. It is worth noting that the role of paramilitaries remains unchallenged and they remain key to the present conflict in northern Mali ("Suicide attack against Mali Tuaregs," 2015).

How did the political cause of counterterrorism become militarised despite the well-informed initial caution and awareness? This necessitates analysis to identify how the language of diplomatic communication locates priorities and identities, for the very words used by Malian diplomats gain great relevance at this stage. This is the key instance where diplomatic communication by Malian officers could link their approach to policy implementation to US identification of subjects and political issues, and can be found delving into the history of this specific diplomatic communication. At a 2008 meeting, President Touré told the US ambassador McCulley and AFRICOM commander General Ward that the priority was 'to develop the capacity to control Mali's northern zones' highlighting the 'roughly 650,000 square km of terrain in northern Mali. Touré said he was counting on US support for this venture' (08BAMAKO217). In terms of how to achieve this, he indicated that 'Mali wants to help the U.S. counter Islamic extremism, but that Mali must deal with its security issues on its own' and proceeded to request

military training and material assistance (08BAMAKO217). President Touré concluded this request with a reminder of Malian counterterrorist commitment to collaboration in counterterrorism through TSCT Partnership and other programs (08BAMAKO217).

This approach can be retraced to a 2007 meeting between US Deputy Secretary of State Negroponte and Malian President Touré and Foreign Minister Ouane. In the textual evidence of this meeting key identifications of subjects and articulations of conflict above analysed and which were progressively absorbed into US policy application (07BAMAKO1361). The most salient articulation emerging from this meeting, which as analysed is repeated in subsequent cables, is the link between Malian lack of control of the north and terrorism, particularly following the peace agreement that in the late 1990s effectively reduced Malian military presence in the north to a minimum, for 'Mali's compliance with this agreement created a security vacuum that terrorists, extremists and illicit traffickers have now turned to their advantage.' (07BAMAKO1361). A key consequence of this, the narrative posits, is that groups such as Tuareg rebels, 'traffickers' and 'bandits' are facilitating the activities of AQIM as well as affording safe haven. This is a key subtlety and is worth quoting in full. As the cable reports, Foreign Minister Ouane

drew a distinction between Malian Tuaregs and AQIM, noting that Mali's Tuareg population had disassociated itself with extremism and terrorist ideologies. He characterised Malian nationals, whether ethnic Tuareg or otherwise, who provide economic or logistical support to AQIM as bandits involved in trafficking everything from arms to drugs and cigarettes. Referring to illicit traffickers and AQIM, Ouane said this base must be suffocated so that this extremism does not spread. "We do not want," he continued, "terrorists using our territory as a safe haven. Their presence puts in question our security and that of the region. (07BAMAKO1361)

This identification of subjects in this text is key: Tuaregs are not terrorists per se, but many are facilitators of AQIM. The solution, Touré argued, was increased US military assistance in the form of training, material including vehicles, communication equipment and air assets. This identification, although to some extent challenged by US diplomats on the ground, was to dominate subsequent policymaking, drawing the implementation of counterterrorism initiatives towards security rather than social and political solutions. This is the moment of diplomatic communication where it is possible to locate the origin of the "Tuareg first, then AQIM" approach in US policymaking, and the gradual decline of approaches advocating the use of US influence in Mali to constructively find long-term solutions to northern grievances. This Malian diplomatic intervention in US identification of political subjects was, it is important to highlight, facilitated by the identification of Mali (enthusiastically supported by Malian officials) as a strong partner. 'At the close of the meeting, President Touré told the Deputy Secretary and Amb. Danilovitch that he had recently heard a report on Radio France that described Mali as the "favorite child" of the U.S. President. Touré said he was extremely happy to hear Mali described as such and that he agreed with the description. "You can," said the President, "count on us".' (07BAMAKO1361).

It might be added that another potential counterterrorist collaboration was available, but never considered because of the above-examined focus on state-centric security and the identification of the Tuareg as potential or part-time AQIM facilitators. At numerous meetings with embassy staff, Tuareg leaders such as Ibrahim Mohamed Asselah, Ahmada ag Bibi and Deity ag Sidamou actively reported on AQIM activities in the north and on

their own anti-AQIM operations (08BAMAKO888). These instances of assistance, it should be noted, are not insignificant and, in the period studied, amount to much more anti-AQIM effort than the Malian government had even been able to mount. They include: assistance to free Western hostages (08BAMAKO888, 09BAMAKO186), several expressions of goodwill to the US (07BAMAKO394, 09BAMAKO186) as well as the particularly relevant reports of efforts to fight AQIM in a number of battles (06BAMAKO1243, 09BAMAKO257) and their willingness to participate in anti-AQIM offensives with the US and other partners, since they too loathe ‘Salafists’ (07BAMAKO1006).

### *Conclusions*

Territorial control and haven denial approaches to counterterrorism are now being widely questioned on the basis of their recent ineffectiveness in a number of theatres of the War on Terror. (see for instance “The Myth of the Terrorist Safe Haven,” 2015) This analysis has asked the *how* questions through an investigation of US and Malian diplomatic dynamics. How did this approach become dominant in Mali counterterrorism policy despite the initially wide-ranging social and political objectives of US policy in the Sahel? Analysis of US diplomatic communication 2006-2010 has explored the reporting and terms of policy advice provided by diplomats at the Bamako mission, how policy concerns were articulated and came to influence subsequent diplomatic reporting and, finally, how this affected the identification of political subjects such as the Tuareg and affected policymaking.

This analysis has found that, firstly, prioritisation of diplomatic communication in response to dominant policy concerns resulted in a filtering of diplomatic information and advice. Some information became irrelevant, whilst the information that remained in diplomatic communication was relevant in terms of the dominating territorial control approach to counterterrorism. In other words, the terms in which policy priorities were articulated governed the filtering of information, furthering focus on territorial control issues and purportedly terrorism-enabling actors like the Tuareg, leaving behind the relevance of social and political issues in northern Mali. Secondly, this conditioning of the terms of diplomatic communication enabled Touré’s government to propose and obtain the enshrining of its “Tuareg first, then AQIM” approach and meant that, contrary to the advice of diplomats that the US could and should pressure Mali for fulfilment of the Algiers Accords (see 08BAMAKO462 for instance), no such pressure was exercised.

The failure to pressure for implementation of the political and social solutions of the Algiers Accords and the subsequent focus on a border and territorial security solution directly enabled the disaster of 2012. Mali’s government had been enabled and supported in *not* dealing with northern grievances, as Gutelius (2007) predicted. This was made possible by Malian diplomacy’s capacity to draw on US policy concerns to further its own approach to counterinsurgency in northern Mali and continually delay implementation of the Algiers Accords. This policy position was additionally a contributing factor in the 2012 Malian Army coup whose military leaders advocated further force to control the north.

Analysis of diplomatic communication demonstrates that the source of the ultimate failure of identification of subjects and key issues in US counterterrorism policymaking in



Mali was the relentless prioritisation of antiterrorism policy articulated in terms of territorial control. It led to priority objectives being articulated as military and security targets which were assessed in terms of military progress, rather than the political, social and development objectives advocated by diplomats. The role and function of this articulation of policy priorities is what critical political theorists label an episteme. As Foucault argued, an episteme is an apparatus that governs the admissibility of knowledge, defining 'the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice' (Foucault, 1972, p. 168). In the case of counterterrorism in Mali, the discourse of counterterrorism, dominated by territorial, border and population control security approaches acts an episteme: it discards the information and advice of diplomats, and offers answers from its own internal logic. In other words, the prioritisation of territorial security approaches in the implementation of counterterrorism policy led to a requirement for these factors to be highlighted in diplomatic communication, to the detriment of social and political issues. This prioritisation further reinforced the territorial approach to counterterrorism in Mali. In diplomatic communication the analysis has observed that this process of prioritisation led to other information identifying northern Malian political subjects falling out of relevance. I should highlight that this is not the result of a strategic decision to ignore reporting Tuareg political grievances in favour of shoring up the Malian state. Rather, such information simply became irrelevant.

The diplomatic reporting dynamic that dropped contextual details and nuance in favour of reporting in the terms and articulations of territorial control approaches to counterterrorism provided an opportunity for the Malian regime. Malian diplomats articulated their own approach to northern issues deploying vocabulary and strategic currency that was already of the highest priority in US policymaking. This unlocked considerable agency for the Malian government to influence the detail of the application of counterterrorism policy in Mali. It was possible because Malian diplomatic interventions purportedly responded to the very words, articulations of the dominant policy concern with control of territory and subjects which, acting as episteme, categorised these interventions as valid and commensurate. The identities deployed in these interventions were key to this success: the Tuareg as opportunistic AQIM facilitators, the desert as a vast ungoverned Hobbesian anarchic space to be tamed by force to deny 'safe haven' to AQIM.

Tuareg, Berbiche and other northern minorities became the political subjects to be brought under control. They inhabited spaces that were removed from modern development and the spatial safety provided by state control of territory and borders. Furthermore, these subjects became identified with the enablers of terrorism – traffickers, criminals, insurgents that destabilise partner states – that intelligence gathering priority directives ordered diplomats to find. This was a fruitful manoeuvre for Touré's government: it resulted, against the advice offered by US diplomats in Bamako, in US acceptance of the "Tuareg first, then AQIM" approach, minimal US pressure to implement the Algiers Accords and concentration of US assistance on military and strategic objectives, rather than resolution of northern social, economic and ethnic grievances.

As Senator Coons argued, there was and there is much more to Mali, the Western Sahel and the Sahara than terror and extremism. Policy ought to address 'all three of these difficult, complex and interconnected crises – security, political and humanitarian – at the same time. ("Senate African Affairs Subcommittee hearing on Mali," 2012) The

knowledge to do this was available, but was made irrelevant by concentration on security approaches to terrorism. We should have listened to the guys on the ground.

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